



THE YARD

A JAG STORY

by Ari Dan

CHAPTER THREE LETTERS FROM COLLEGE CREEK

“They were written because the truth had nowhere else to go.”

The brick pillars of Gate 1 swallowed the Lexus, transitioning them from the historic streets of Annapolis into the sprawling, high-security sanctuary of the Naval Academy.

The Yard.

It had begun as Fort Severn, an old Army post watching the water, before the Navy claimed the ground and filled it with stone, discipline and generations of young men and women taught to become officers before they fully understood the weight of command.

Inside the SUV, the air-conditioned quiet was broken only by the rhythmic rustle of decades-old notebook paper and Mac’s voice. She read slowly, her tone even and searching, weighing each line against the next as she decoded the handwriting of a dead man.

August, 1983,” Mac read aloud, her eyes tracking Chaz’s tight, ink-faded handwriting across the pages of what appeared to be a shared notebook.

“Joanie, It’s only been a few days and I miss you more than I thought possible. Leaving you standing at the bus station as the bus pulled away was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. I couldn’t wave because this isn’t goodbye. It’s the start. The start of something new.

Our summer together was the best few months of my life. I can still see you sitting on the beach waiting for me after a long shift at the shipyard dock, grease on my hands and smelling like diesel from working on those steam turbine propulsion units. I was exhausted every night, but seeing you immediately made me forget the heat in that engine room.

God, I miss those weeks. Remember the late-night diner runs where we’d sit in a booth until two in the morning, listening to the jukebox while I tried to explain how boiler systems work? You pretended to care, but mostly you just let me ramble. Or the night we got caught in that sudden thunderstorm under the boardwalk, watching the lightning hit the ocean and talking about what the future held?

Your idea for this notebook was brilliant. I didn’t open my bag until I was miles past the city limits. I was too afraid that if I looked at it too soon, I’d ask the bus driver to turn right around and head back to you. But when I unzipped my duffel, there was your handwriting on the very first page. Reading where you told me to write as much as I can so you can feel like you’re right here with me- Joanie, it hit me right in the chest. I’ll fill every single line of this book if it keeps us close.”

Mac continued to skim the pages. “He wrote another entry to her the second he got settled into Bancroft... ‘The heat down here on the Severn is brutal this morning, the kind of thick, humid air that smells like river water and fresh asphalt. But nobody is complaining. We marched back onto the Yard today as Firsties. Seniors. It’s a strange sort of gravity...”

Outside the car window, the present day rose up to meet his words.

THE YARD

The Yard was a kinetic sea of white and Navy blue. The late morning sun beat down on the manicured lawns, ricocheting off the French Renaissance roofs of Bancroft Hall with a blinding, metallic glare. People were moving with that distinct, high-tempo military purpose.

Harm slowed the vehicle to a crawl to avoid a group of pristine midshipmen in crisp summer whites crossing toward the boathouse.

“You can tell who belongs to which world the second they step onto the brick,” Mac continued, her voice mirroring the sight outside. *“The plebes are still scurrying along the walls, eyes locked straight ahead. But the Firsties walk the center of the walkways. We have the space now. We’re looking at the horizon, realizing that the next time we march out of these gates, we’ll be commissioned officers in the United States Navy. The excitement is real.”*

Harm watched a young midshipman, a Firstie, judging by the stripe on his shoulder, laughing as he threw a casual, easy salute to a passing lieutenant. Harm felt a tightening in his own chest. He had been that boy. He had walked that exact sidewalk with that exact brand of terrifying arrogance.

“Look to your right,” Harm murmured, keeping his hands steady on the wheel.

Mac looked up from the letter.

Along the main thoroughfare, the Academy’s staff had erected massive, navy-blue banners stretched between the historic lampposts, embroidered with gold crests: WELCOME HOME, CLASS OF 1984, 20th REUNION HEADQUARTERS, and ALUMNI REGISTRATION AHEAD.

The American flag and the blue-and-gold Navy colors whipped violently in the bay breeze from the massive staff near the seawall.

“Look at them.” Mac’s eyes scanned a group of men gathered on the steps of Mahan Hall.

Harm looked. It was a snapshot of time folding in on itself. A group of men in their late thirties and early forties, some he recognized, others he didn’t, were hugging and shaking hands as they welcomed one another back to where it all started.

Harm watched two men salute one another then drop their travel bags directly onto the grass, sprinting the last ten yards to collide in a brutal, rib-cracking bear grip. One of them lost his sunglasses; neither cared. Nearby, old friends were introduced to, or reacquainted with, spouses, young children were being hoisted onto broad shoulders, teenagers stood off near the back of the circle trying to appear disinterested, and decades of professional distance were being dismantled in a matter of seconds by heartwarming laughter.

Mac watched the two men laughing on the grass, but her thumb smoothed over the worn edge of the page. The laughter outside felt loud, almost intrusive against the quiet gravity of the paper in her lap.

They get to come back, Mac thought softly. Her eyes tracked the cheerful alumni gathered along the walkway as Harm slowly steered the car through the Yard. They get the twenty-year reunions, the growing families, and the devoted partners who stood by them through endless sea deployments.

She looked down, her features setting into hard, unyielding lines as her eyes found the next sentence on the aged paper. *Chaz Mercer didn't even make it to graduation.*

Harm caught the quiet shift in her posture, his knuckles tightening slightly on the steering wheel as he turned down the tree-lined avenue toward the hall. “What does he say next?”

Mac cleared her throat, her thumb smoothing the margin of the notebook as she read Chaz’s words aloud into the quiet cabin:

“...But there’s a shadow to it this year. The Yard feels different when you know you’re on the way out. Some of the guys are changing. They’re looking at each other differently. The competition for top billets will put us all in a pressure cooker. Including me.

I’ve been asking myself how much things are going to change between all of us before this year is over. But if there’s anyone I can count on in my last year to stay solid, to not let the pressure or the Academy get between us, it’s my closest friends.

The Severn Seven, that's what everyone calls us after we almost got caught hanging a class banner to the lighting rod on top of the Chapel dome: Harm, Keeter, Sturgis, Joss, Marshall, Rick, and me. We're supposed to be a brotherhood plus one, Joss being the only girl, all of us heading toward the final leap into the Navy together. These are the men I would stand beside and kill for... or put my life on the line for in the name of duty. That is what we learned on our first day: you are responsible for the men and women beside you."

Mac's voice trailed off. The last few sentences seemed to linger in the air, heavy and prophetic against the backdrop of cheering alumni outside the window.

Harm kept his eyes fixed on the road, but his jaw set hard as he steered the car past the copper-sheathed monument of the USS Tripoli bell.

His eyes tracked two familiar silhouettes standing near the blue-and-gold alumni tent. Even after twenty years, there was no mistaking them. He could spot Jack Keeter's distinct, cocky aviator lean from a mile away, head back, hands in his pockets, holding steady. Standing beside him was Sturgis Turner, broad-shouldered, tall, and solid as a mountain, bearing the same calm, unyielding posture he brought into every courtroom.

The Severn Seven, Harm thought, the name tasting familiar on his tongue. Two of them were right there, alive, laughing, and aging, while the boy who wrote those words remained forever frozen in 1984.

"Seven days," Harm murmured, his eyes shifting back to the road as he looked for an open parking space.

"Reunion week is only seven days, Mac. Once these guys scatter back to their commands and civilian lives, the window closes. If we're going to pull the truth out of twenty years of buried secrets, we have to do it before the week is up."

A heavy, somber beat of silence stretched between them as Harm brought the car to a slow crawl. He stared out over the steering wheel at the sea of familiar faces.

"To think that one of our own... someone who swore the exact same oath... could have had a hand in taking Chaz's life? It's a gut punch, Mac. It makes my stomach turn."

He paused, taking a slow breath as his grip on the wheel eased slightly. When he looked over at her, the dark sorrow in his blue eyes gave way to a quiet, unwavering resolve.

“But if Mrs. Mercer is right, if Chaz’s death wasn’t just a tragic accident, then it’s on us to set the record straight,” Harm said firmly. “I owe it to Chaz, I owe it to his mother, and I owe it to the memory of who we were when we walked through those gates,” Harm said firmly, his voice thick with a heavy, personal responsibility. He looked over at her, his expression softening as he met her gaze. “We have to figure this out, Mac. I can’t do this without you.”

Mac reached over, placing a gentle, grounding hand over his on the gearshift, offering him a soft, reassuring squeeze. “And we will, Harm. Together. But don’t forget why we drove up here in the first place. You deserve to celebrate coming back, seeing your friends, and hallmarking twenty years of military service. It’s such an incredible accomplishment, and one I’ve been proud to have a front-row seat to at JAG.”

Harm slowed the Lexus as he reached the stop sign at the corner of Decatur Road, bringing the SUV to a complete stop before turning down the tree-lined avenue toward the alumni lot.

While the car sat idling in the brief lull of passing traffic, Harm leaned across the console. He cupped the back of Mac’s neck with his free hand, drawing her in for a quick, tender kiss that lingered just long enough to express everything words couldn’t.

“Message received, Colonel,” he murmured against her lips, a soft, affectionate warmth returning to his eyes.

Giving the accelerator a light press, he guided the car smoothly into the reserved parking area and killed the ignition.

With a soft, decisive snap, Mac closed the faded journal and tucked it safely into her leather bag, intentionally closing the door on the investigation for the moment as she looked out at the bustling lawn.

“I can see the icebreakers now,” Mac said, a cheeky, teasing spark returning to her eyes.

“Everyone, meet my girlfriend, Sarah MacKenzie. Mind answering a few quick questions about a cold case before we fire up the grill?”

Harm shook his head, a wry, irrepressible smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as the lightness of the afternoon reclaimed the cabin.

“Out of the car, smart ass.”

“I’m moving,” she said, opening her car door with easy grace, a light wind catching her dress. “Only because I know you wouldn’t have it any other way,” Mac countered smoothly.

Harm’s jaw softened into a warm, lingering smile as he watched her step out into the bay breeze. “Damn right I wouldn’t.”

Off in the distance, under the shaded canopy of the welcome tent, Jack Keeter slapped Sturgis on the shoulder, wiping a tear of laughter from his eye. “I’m telling you, Turner, the skipper didn’t even realize the navigation charts hadn’t seen a Notice to Mariners update in three years until we nearly ran the ship aground on a shoal.”

Sturgis rumbled a deep laugh, shaking his head. “Standard naval aviation intellect. I don’t know how you aviators survive a deployment without a black-shoe on the bridge to watch your stern...”

Sturgis paused, his eyes tracking a sleek, silver Lexus SUV as it smoothly pulled into a parking space. The driver’s side door swung open, and a towering figure stepped out into the bright Annapolis sun.

Even in casual khaki shorts, a crisp white button-down with the sleeves folded neatly at his forearms, Harmon Rabb Jr. carried an undeniable, effortless air. It was a potent mix of hotshot aviator swagger and the commanding, deliberate presence of a senior JAG officer. He looked every bit the poster-boy, tall, confident, striking, and completely oblivious to the fact of it all.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in: the Navy’s prodigal son,” Keeter smirked, crossing his arms. He hadn’t stopped teasing Harm with that line since the man starred in his own recruiting commercial. “He actually made it.”

But before Sturgis could reply, the passenger door swung open.

Time seemed to slow as a pair of long, exceptionally attractive, sun-kissed legs stepped out of the vehicle, framed perfectly by the hem of a vibrant green sundress and a pair of tan wedge heels.

Keeter’s smirk cut short, his posture shifting as his gaze locked onto the passenger door. “Wait a second,” Keeter said, lowering his voice as he took her in. “Who’s the wingman? Sturgis... did Rabb tell you he was bringing someone?”

Sturgis didn’t answer right away. He took a silent, highly appreciative look as the woman stood up fully, smoothing down the fabric of her dress. The afternoon sun caught the rich tones of her hair, and she possessed a radiant, glowing confidence that practically commanded the space around her.

Then, she turned toward the tent.

Sturgis blinked once. Then again.

“Jack... that’s not a date. That’s Mac.”

Keeter stared at her, then at Harm.

For years, Keeter and Sturgis had watched Harm and Mac dance the same infuriating, professional tango from a distance. They were the dynamic duo. JAG’s premier team. Partners. Same people, same dance, wrapped in a rigid layer of military protocol and mutual denial. Leave it to Harm, the most straight-laced guy in their class, outside of Sturgis, to bring legal reinforcement to a college reunion. Keeter opened his mouth to joke about Harm bringing his partner along to court-martial anyone who got too rowdy at the tailgate, ready for Harm’s standard, boilerplate ‘*she’s my partner and co-counsel*, Keeter’ routine.

Instead, both men were knocked back on their heels.

Harm didn't wait for her to walk around. He stepped directly around the hood of the Lexus, met Mac halfway, and without a single shred of hesitation, firmly intertwined his fingers with hers. He didn't look at the tent. He didn't look at his old classmates. He just looked down at Mac, a soft, private smile breaking across his face as he began walking her hand-in-hand toward the Welcome Tent.

Sturgis stood entirely frozen, his mouth slightly open as he watched the seamless, possessive way Harm's large hand anchored hers. All the commander could manage to choke out was, "I'll be damned."

Keeter, completely stunned into silence for perhaps the first time in his naval career, took a full, sweeping view of Mac. Out of her standard olive-drab utility uniform, completely stripped of the severe Marine regulations, she was absolutely stunning. She didn't just look beautiful; she looked alive, glowing with a relaxed happiness that Keeter had never seen on her face in Washington.

Keeter's eyes darted between the two of them, mentally measuring how perfectly she fit against Harm's towering frame, her shoulder tucked naturally under his arm, their strides in perfect, easy synchronization.

Keeter let out a low whistle, shaking his head as the smirk vanished into a look that said *it's about time*.

"Damn ain't the word, Turner," Keeter muttered under his breath, a rare and soft warmth creeping into his voice. "Look at them... Bravo Zulu, Hammer. Bravo Zulu."

Keeter patted Sturgis sharply on the chest, a wicked, familiar glint appearing in his eyes. "Let's go. I think Rabb needs an appropriate welcome for old times' sake."

With matching grins, they advanced from the shade of the tent, cutting across the manicured grass toward Harm and Mac. Halfway there, Keeter cupped his hands around his mouth and belted out a distinct, piercing Academy call, a rallying cry from their midshipman days that instantly shattered the polite murmur of the lawn.

The sound drew the attention of everyone nearby. Even Varese, who had been standing a short distance away conversing with the wife of another Class of '84 alumnus, paused mid-sentence and turned to watch with peak curiosity.

Harm knew exactly what was coming the second the call left Keeter's mouth. Seeing his two old friends bearing down on him, he raised his free hand in a desperate stop gesture. "Keeter, Sturgis, don't. Do not do this."

He held up their intertwined hands, lifting Mac's hand like a shield. "I am clearly occupied here."

Keeter didn't even slow down. "She's a Marine, Hammer. She'll understand. I'm sure it's not the first time she's broken formation."

Harm frantically turned his gaze to the more reasonable of the two. "Sturgis, come on, man. Talk some sense into him. We are way too old for this. We hold rank. We have careers. Reputations."

Sturgis kept walking, his grin widening. "We aren't at JAG this week, Rabb. Everything on the Yard is fair game." Sturgis looked at the panicked edge in Harm's eyes and instantly clocked the real source of his anxiety: Mac was about to watch his dignified, cool and collected facade get absolutely demolished up close and personal. Leaning into the torment, Sturgis added, "Buddy, you should have thought about that before you brought Mac. Until we get this out of the way, you aren't a Commander in the United States Navy. You're a..."

"Plebe on the quarterdeck!" Keeter barked.

Realizing there was absolutely no legal appeal or strategic retreat left, Harm let go of Mac's hand, offering her a quick, silent look of pure apology that begged her to move safely out of the blast radius.

Mac, her eyes dancing with sheer delight, gladly stepped off to the side, crossing her arms to take it all in.

Keeter and Sturgis immediately began to circle Harm like wolves, while Harm dropped into a low, athletic defensive stance, his long arms extended to ward them off. "I cannot believe you guys are actually doing this," Harm muttered, pivoting to keep them both in front of him.

“Believe it, Hammer!” Keeter yelled.

They charged.

Like a brotherhood of teenagers trapped in the bodies of senior officers, they clashed. Keeter went low for Harm's waist while Sturgis tried to secure his broad shoulders. It was a classic two-on-one ambush, but years of real-world combat training, survival evasion, and physically maneuvering through dangerous investigations allowed Harm to hold his own. He dug his heels into the grass, threw a heavy forearm block that sent Keeter stumbling, and used his height to pivot away from Sturgis's reach.

“Is that all you got?” Harm gasped, a competitive laugh breaking through his protests.

Suddenly, a third figure materialized from the edge of the tent. Marshall Kirkland dropped his garment bag onto the grass, and shouted, “Need some close air support, boys?”

With Kirkland joining the fray, the numbers shifted decisively. Sturgis locked Harm's arms from behind, Keeter swept his legs, and Kirkland grabbed his ankles. Despite Harm's impressive thrashing, the three men seamlessly hoisted the commander completely upside down.

Gravity took over. As they held him inverted, the contents of Harm's crisp white shirt and khaki pockets spilled directly onto the pristine Academy grass: a set of car keys, a black flip phone, a crisp leather wallet, and a handful of change that clinked against the turf.

Keeter looked down at the loose items and let out a hearty laugh. “Those pockets aren't sitting so high now, are they, Hammer?”

The entire perimeter erupted. A wave of booming laughter rippled through the surrounding crowd. Other classmates cheered from the registration lines, spouses and families were chuckling into their drink cups, and even a few passing midshipmen and Academy administrators slowed their stride to grin at the timeless spectacle of alumni reverting to their most primitive time as plebes.

With all the blood rushing directly to his head, Harm's upside-down world offered him a perfectly inverted view of Mac. She was leaning against her wedges, her hands on her hips, her face lit up by the most brilliantly tickled, unshielded grin he had ever seen. She was memorizing every single detail.

"Alright, alright," Sturgis rumbled, feeling the strain in his shoulders. "Let him up before he passes out."

Kirkland, still holding tight to one of Harm's loafers, shook his head. "Not without the code to come right-side up. Rules are rules, Rabb."

Struggling to find the humor through the rush of blood to his eyes, Harm groaned, reciting the old, classified plebe-year nonsense poem they used to make him yell during dining-in. "*The sea is blue, the gold is bright, let a poor midshipman see the light!*"

"Good enough!" Kirkland laughed.

The three of them hoisted Harm back onto his feet. Harm stumbled slightly as the world spun, his hair wildly disheveled and his shirt completely losing its military press. Before he could even think about throwing a retaliatory punch, Keeter stepped in and wrapped him in a bruising, genuine bear hug.

As soon as Keeter let go, Sturgis stepped up, clamping a massive, brotherly hand over Harm's in a heavy handshake, patting him steadily on the back. "About time we caught up without a case file sitting between us."

Finally, Marshall Kirkland stepped forward, mockingly snapping a crisp, textbook salute, before breaking into a wide smile and pulling Harm into a strong bro-hug. "Welcome back, High-Pockets."

Harm puffed out a breath, dusting off his shorts and pointing a warning finger at Kirkland. "Hey. Watch the nickname."

Kirkland's smile softened into something deeply genuine as he looked at his old friend. "In all seriousness... it's damn good to see you, Rabb."

Harm smiled back, the last of his irritation vanishing into the warm Maryland air. “Likewise, Kirkland. Likewise.”

Harm smoothed down his rumpled white button-down and tossed a look over his shoulder, lifting his hand to signal to Mac that the coast was clear.

As she walked over, the sheer glee radiating from her face was impossible to miss. Her eyes were still bright with amusement. Harm dusted a stray blade of grass off his shorts, giving her a dry, mock-offended look. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

Mac let out a breathless laugh, tossing her hair back. “Every single minute of it, Commander.”

Harm turned back to the circle of his classmates, raising his voice so Sturgis, Keeter, and Marshall could all hear him clearly. “You see, these guys don't know how to properly welcome someone who could very well outrank them one of these days.”

Keeter snorted, crossing his arms. “Please. Until you actually outrank us, Rabb, you will always have to pay the toll of emptying your pockets. It’s an Academy mandate.”

Accustomed to the sharp, rapid-fire nature of Navy banter after years at JAG, Mac didn't miss a beat. She stepped right up to Harm’s side, a brilliant, dangerous smirk playing on her lips. “Actually, gentlemen, if we’re talking linear seniority, I officially outrank him by several months. So the next time he tries to pull rank on anyone, I’ll just override it. Personally, I think all pockets are fair game this week.”

Harm froze, completely blindsided that his own girlfriend would commit mutiny against him within twenty minutes of stepping onto the Yard. He shot her a sharp, exaggerated look of betrayal. Mac didn't flinch; she shot a mischievously challenging gaze right back, tilting her chin up as if dare him to argue the math.

Marshall Kirkland chuckled, stepping forward to finally take her in and introduce himself. “Well, if you’re already turning on him, I think we’re off to being fast friends...”

Marshall stopped dead in his tracks.

The words caught in his throat as his eyes fully locked onto Mac's face. The easy, rolling laughter died instantly in his chest. For a handful of excruciating seconds, Marshall just stared, the color subtly shifting in his cheeks as the uncanny, haunting resemblance to Diane Schonke, Harm's deceased Academy girlfriend, hit him like a physical blow.

Sensing the sudden change in the air, Harm moved in smoothly beside Mac, resting a gentle hand at the small of her back to buy Marshall a second.

"Mac, this is Commander Marshall Kirkland. Chief Engineer over at NAVSEA," Harm introduced. "Marshall, Colonel Sarah MacKenzie."

Marshall blinked, shaking off the fog and clearing his throat. "Excuse me, ma'am. It's a pleasure," he said, his smile warming as he regained his footing. He took in the two of them, opting for lighthearted deflection. "I'll admit, Colonel, Harm might have me beat on height, but I promise you I'm the one with actual charm. Rabb has always stumbled around a room for a while before he actually finds his footing."

Mac smiled, a subtle spark of recognition lighting up her eyes as she took Marshall's hand. "You know, Commander, that is a surprisingly accurate assessment."

"No formalities this week, Colonel...it's just Marshall," he corrected with an easy smile.

"Fair enough. Marshall it is."

Sturgis stepped in next, past Harm to pull Mac into a warm, genuine hug. "It's great to see you out of the office, Mac. Tell me, do you really think you can handle a room full of rowdy sailors for an entire week?"

Mac chuckled, returning the embrace before stepping back. "Doesn't sound any different than any other week, Sturgis."

"Fair enough," Sturgis rumbled with a deep laugh.

Keeter, who had been watching the exchange with a hawk-like intensity, decided it was time to lay it on thick.

He had already clocked the proprietary way Harm's hand kept returning to Mac's waist, and he knew the exact buttons to push. Ever since he had met Mac years ago, Keeter had never hidden his appreciation for her, and he knew nothing rattled Harmon Rabb Jr. quite like someone flirting with Sarah MacKenzie.

"Mac," Keeter purred, stepping into her personal space with a blinding, rakish smile. "You get more beautiful by the day. Honestly, I didn't think it was scientifically possible."

Harm's jaw tightened instantly. His posture went completely rigid, a subtle flinch in his cheek proving that Keeter's opening had landed dead center.

Seeing the discomfort flare across Harm's face, Keeter decided to dial the amplifier all the way up. "You know, the last time I was in D.C. you didn't give me a proper goodbye. So, I think it's only fair we get a proper hello."

Before Mac could even process the warning, Keeter stepped forward, caught her completely around the waist, and lifted her straight off her wedge heels. He spun her around in a dizzying, cinematic circle right there on the grass.

Surprised by the sudden loss of gravity, Mac let out a sharp, involuntary yelp, before breaking out into laughter.

The sound of that yelp clustered with her laughter went straight under Harm's skin like a lightning strike. By the time Keeter's shoes settled back into the turf and he placed Mac back on her feet, Harm was already occupying the space between them. His physical presence was massive, his eyes narrowing as he stepped directly into Keeter's line of sight.

"This welcome party is over, Jack," Harm said, his voice dropping into a dangerously low, gravelly register.

Mac placed a steadying hand on Harm's forearm, sensing the sudden surge of protective, jealous energy radiating off him. "Harm," she said, her tone a gentle warning.

Realizing he was on the verge of letting his temper get the better of him in front of his old classmates, Harm forced his features to relax, diffusing the tension with a wry, calculated joke to keep things from going south. “He’s already had me turned upside down today, Mac. I’m not about to let him make you his next victim.”

“Oh, come on, Hammer,” Keeter teased, stepping closer, entirely amused by how easily he had provoked him. “Boy, would I love to see what falls out of her pockets if we tipped her over.”

Harm stepped up face-to-face with Keeter, his shoulder blades squaring, his jaw flinching with a hard, unyielding intensity. He knew Keeter’s humor, but his protective instincts over Mac, especially here, where the ghosts of the past were already crowding them, were running on a razor-thin fuse.

Mac saw the storm brewing and decided to draw the line. She stepped between the two men, looking up at Keeter with a look that perfectly blended her fierce Marine authority with the easy comfort of an old friend. “Keeter,” she said, her voice cool but laced with no nonsense. “Keep playing with fire, and it will get you court-martialed for disturbing the peace.”

Before Keeter could answer, Mac firmly took Harm by the arm, using just enough leverage to pull him away from the confrontation and guide him toward the registration tables.

Sturgis and Marshall watched them walk away, thoroughly amused by the domestic display. Sturgis shook his head, slinging an arm over Keeter’s shoulder as they watched Harm’s stiff, protective stride. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

Keeter watched Mac’s green dress sway as she walked away with Harm, a wide, unrepentant grin splitting his face. He chuckled, adjusting his sunglasses. “What can I say? This week is going to be incredibly fun. Just like old times, Sturgis. I can already tell... this is going to be a reunion to remember.”

Leaving Keeter by the registration tables, Harm guided Mac away from the grassy lawn and toward the towering, ivory-colored pavilion stretching across the courtyard of Mahan Hall.

The transition from the casual chaos of the Welcome Tent to the official Meet & Greet was striking.

Underneath the high canopy, the air-conditioned breeze cut through the heavy Maryland humidity. The space was a masterclass in Annapolis elegance, white-clothed tables were topped with burning candles, silver trays of high-end hors d'oeuvres circulated seamlessly, and a live naval jazz quartet played softly in the background. The low, rumbling hum of voices clinked against fine glassware.

“Well,” Mac murmured, her hand still resting comfortably in the crook of Harm’s elbow as she scanned the room. “They certainly didn’t skimp on the budget.”

“That’s what happens when a class actually pays its dues,” Harm said, his eyes steadily surveying the crowd. “I have it on good authority Joss even convinced the administration to relax a few strict rules for the week. They practically gave us the keys to the place.”

“Harm! Mac! Wait up!”

Sturgis’s voice cut through the jazz as he navigated through the crowd toward them, leading a striking woman with a warm, artistic smile. Varese looked stunning in a flowing bohemian dress, a sharp contrast to the rigid military silhouettes dominating the room.

“Varese,” Harm smiled warmly, leaning down to give her a brief hug. “Good to see you.”

“Good to see you, Harm,” Varese said, before her eyes immediately drifted to Mac. A knowing, incredibly brilliant smirk broke across her face as she took in the way Mac and Harm were standing, shoulders brushed together, a domestic comfort vibrating between them that hadn’t been there six months ago. Varese reached out, warmly taking Mac by both hands. “And Sarah... wow. It’s so good to see you. Steal me away for a second, will you? I could really use a reprieve from all the naval jargon.”

Mac laughed gladly, letting Varese pull her a few steps toward a nearby charcuterie station.

“So,” Varese said in a low, teasing tone, plucking a mocktail for herself and passing a sparkling water to Mac as a tray floated by.

“I see Harm finally figured out how to use his words. You two look incredible together.”

Mac felt a rare, soft flush color her cheeks, but she didn't hide the smile that took over her face. She took a sip of her drink, looking across the pavilion to where Harm was currently laughing at something Sturgis said. “It took us long enough, Varese. But yeah. We finally figured it out.”

“Good,” Varese said, her tone turning fiercely supportive as she nudged Mac's shoulder. “Because everyone else with a functioning set of eyes figured it out years ago. Hell, I was late to the party, and even I could see it.”

Mac laughed softly, taking another sip of her glass as her eyes drifted across the room toward Harm. “Was it really that obvious?”

“Sarah, please,” Varese purred, a knowing smirk on her lips. “The tension between you two could have powered the entire Eastern seaboard.”

Varese leaned in an inch closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper so it wouldn't carry over the hum of the crowd.

“Come to think of it... the D.C. power grid hasn't had a single blackout lately. Based on the way Harm is looking over here right now, I'm thinking you two might be single-handedly keeping the lights on.”

Mac opened her mouth to mount a defense, but Varese held up a hand, her smirk widening.

“Don't worry, I won't press for details. The proof is right there on your face, you are practically glowing.”

Mac didn't bother trying to fight it. She just offered a quiet, serene smile, completely at ease as her eyes met Harm's across the room.

“I'm just glad,” Varese added softly, gently clinking her glass against Mac's, “that the two most stubborn people in D.C. finally caught up with the rest of us.”

Across the tented pavilion, Sturgis watched the women step toward the refreshment table. Once Mac and Varese were well out of earshot, Sturgis turned back, fixing Harm with a knowing, heavy look.

“So,” Sturgis began, his voice dropping into a low, rumbling drag. “You and Mac.”

Harm opened his mouth, already framing a standard, lawyerly defense, but Sturgis leaned in, a slow, dry smirk breaking across his face.

“Tell me, Rabb... are you dead, or wishing you were?”

Harm winced, taking the blow fair and square in the chest as his own past words about the kind of men Mac dated echoed back to bite him.

“How about stupid and blind?” Harm muttered, taking a slow sip of his water. “I spent years saying the wrong things, Turner. I’m just damn grateful she didn’t hold it against me when I finally got my head out of my six.”

Sturgis raised an eyebrow, genuinely intrigued. “So when did the tide actually turn?”

“JAG-a-thon,” Harm admitted, a small, irrepressible tug at the corner of his mouth.

“*Really?*” Sturgis looked stunned, shaking his head. “All I remember from that morning was the literal steam coming off Mac after tying you for second.”

“We had a tie-breaker,” Harm chuckled softly, his gaze drifting across the crowd to where Mac was laughing with Varese. “A few extra miles, some breakfast... and a hell of a lot of groveling on my end.”

Sturgis let out a deep, resonant laugh, crossing his arms. “Well, now that you two are officially a package deal, it just makes my life easier. Next time I face either of you in court, I get to serve up a two-for-one special when I win.”

“In your dreams, Turner,” Harm countered with a dry grin.

Sturgis’s tone shifted, his eyes sharpening as he took a sip of his drink. “So... what does the Admiral think about all this?”

Harm's smirk faltered slightly, his jaw tightening as his shoulders stiffened just a fraction. "We haven't told him yet."

"You haven't told Chegwidden?" Sturgis winced, raising his cup as if toasting the reprimand he could already see coming. "God help you, buddy."

"One step at a time," Harm said smoothly, his eyes turning back toward the Yard as his focus sharpened on the week ahead. "First we get through the reunion. Then I'll face the Admiral."

The ambience around the main bar suddenly shifted as a booming, arrogant voice cut straight through the jazz music.

"What do you mean, 'policy'?" Rick Sterling's smooth, projection-filled voice carried across the pavilion, thick with exasperated entitlement. "It's private catering, pal. I don't care if it's Naval Academy grounds, you're telling me I'm sitting through a two-hour alumni panel on club soda and lime?"

Harm's entire posture went rigid. The easy, boyish smile vanished from his face, replaced by a cold, familiar hardness that Mac recognized instantly. She and Varese stepped back over to the guys just as Rick abandoned his argument with the helpless bartender holding a fresh beverage as he turned toward the crowd.

Eric "Rick" Sterling looked like he had stepped straight off a yacht in Monaco. He wore a flawlessly tailored, cream-colored linen sports coat, a custom monogrammed shirt, and a luxury Audemars Piguet watch that caught the chandelier light. He oozed the slick confidence of a corporate titan who bought and sold companies for breakfast.

He was also the one man who had made it his personal mission to beat Harmon Rabb Jr. at every single metric during their four years at the Academy. If Harm represented one end of the Severn Seven, Rick occupied the absolute opposite, with the rest of the crew serving as the only thing holding them in the same orbit.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Rick smirked, adjusting his cuffs as he halted right in front of them. His eyes raked over Harm’s casual attire with patronizing amusement.

“Harmon Rabb. I see the government is still paying you just enough to keep you in off-the-rack khakis. What’s it been? Ten years?”

“Eleven, Rick,” Harm said, his voice flat, completely stripped of warmth as he recalled the last time anyone had managed to drag them into the same room. Harm extended a hand in a brief, civil attempt at etiquette, but Rick just looked at it and left it hanging.

Harm pulled his hand back, his jaw tightening. “I see you’re still funding your ego through defense contracts.”

Rick laughed, a loud, theatrical sound. “Hey, somebody has to build the ships you guys sail on. Vanguard Maritime Systems just acquired the Newport robotic shipyard last month, by the way. But hey, standard active-duty grind for you, right? Still arguing traffic tickets for the Navy?”

Sturgis stepped up beside Harm, sure and steady, fixing Rick with an unyielding stare. “Senior prosecutor,” Sturgis corrected firmly, throwing up a defensive shield for his buddy. “And Harm’s a Commander, Rick. Could be looking at the JAG billet someday.”

“Right, right, a Commander,” Rick chuckled dismissively. He finally turned his gaze to Mac, his eyes narrowing slightly as he took in her striking presence. He offered a practiced, high-society smile, extending a hand. “And who is this lovely lady? Don’t tell me Rabb finally managed to trick a civilian into marrying into the military pension.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Sarah MacKenzie, United States Marine Corps,” Mac said. She ignored his open palm, casually clinking her glass against the sweating, non-alcoholic can Rick looked thoroughly disgusted to be holding. “And I’m pretty sure the Marines would object to that. He’s with me.”

Rick’s eyebrows shot up, a flash of genuine surprise ripping through his polished exterior. “A Marine Colonel? Well, Rabb, I give you credit. You always did manage to punch above your weight class.”

Wanting to test Chaz's theory about toxic competition fracturing the Class of '84, Harm stepped forward, narrowing the physical distance between himself and his old nemesis.

"We're actually here a bit early for a specific reason, Rick. I'm presenting the memorial tribute for Chaz Mercer at the chapel service this week." Harm kept his eyes locked on Rick's face, watching for even a millisecond of a flinch. "His mother asked me to read his name. I remember you two were neck-and-neck for that prime engineering track senior year."

Rick's smile tightened, a subtle, dark shadow passing over his eyes before his corporate mask snapped right back into place.

"Mercer. Right," Rick said, his voice dropping into a chilly, casual indifference. "Tragic business, that creek. But let's be honest, Rabb, the Academy is a meat grinder. Senior year was survival of the fittest. We all wanted the top slots. Chaz was a good kid, but he couldn't handle the pressure of the finish line."

Varese's artist-sharp eyes narrowed as she observed Rick, leaning in slightly toward Sturgis, her disgust evident. The cold, callous assessment made Mac's blood run hot. But before she could fire off a sharp Marine rebuttal, a commanding, highly political female voice cut smoothly through the tension.

"Now, Rick, let's not bring corporate cynicism into my event. This week is about unity."

The group turned. Walking toward them was Commander Jocelyn "Joss" Vance.

As the Chairperson of the Reunion Committee and Deputy Director for Legislative Affairs at the Pentagon, Jocelyn looked immaculate. She wore a perfectly tailored navy-blue sheath dress, her silver commander eagles pinned precisely to her lapel, her hair pulled back into a severe, elegant twist. Carrying a clipboard, she moved with the smooth grace of a woman used to steering congressional committees.

Mac took her in instantly, and a familiar, unbidden pang struck her chest. Jocelyn Vance was breathtaking, a striking blonde, fiercely gorgeous, with the effortless, polished aura Mac had spent years watching Harm fall for.

Of course, Mac thought with a silent, wry twist in her gut. Another brilliant, high-powered blonde. It was a pattern in Harm's life Mac knew all too well.

She was also a woman completely, visibly enthralled by Harmon Rabb Jr.

“Joss,” Harm said, his tone softening as he recognized her. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

“Thank you, Harm,” Jocelyn smiled, her voice rich and confident. Her eyes zeroed in on him, a genuine, fierce warmth flooding her face that went far beyond casual classmate nostalgia. For a second, the intense Pentagon director vanished, replaced by a self-assured woman looking directly at the prize that had eluded her decades ago.

“It’s been far too long,” Joss said, stepping deliberately into Harm’s personal space with bold confidence. “Tokyo and Stuttgart kept me away from D.C. for years, but now that I’m back at the Pentagon, I have no intention of letting us lose touch again.”

She had been forced to watch from the sidelines back at the Academy, but she wasn't a frustrated midshipman anymore. She was powerful, successful, and completely certain of what she wanted.

Joss finally turned her head to acknowledge Mac, her eyes sweeping over the Marine with a cool, assessing sharpness. There was no fear in her gaze, only a sudden, icy calculation, followed by a faint flicker of realization.

So, Harm still has a type, Joss thought, she recognized the competition instantly. Diane had once occupied the space Jocelyn wanted. Now another woman stood there, darker, sharper and very much alive. Mac looked like Diane, yes, but to Jocelyn, she was simply another hurdle to be cleared and this time, she had no intention of losing.

“Joss, I’d like you to meet Lieutenant Colonel Sarah MacKenzie,” Harm introduced smoothly, completely oblivious to the silent, territorial warfare sparking between them. “Sarah is my girlfriend.”

Jocelyn’s smile didn’t falter. She maintained her polished, diplomatic poise, but her eyes locked onto Mac’s with a challenging intensity as she extended a manicured hand.

“Colonel MacKenzie. A pleasure. Welcome to the Yard. Harm is an incredibly special part of this class’s history. I’m glad you could join us to see it.”

Mac took her hand, matching her firm grip with an invisible steel of her own, her voice smooth as silk. “Thank you, Commander Vance. I’ve heard quite a bit about the Class of ’84. It’s fascinating to see how competitive you all still are.”

Sturgis cleared his throat with quiet authority, gently putting an arm around Varese to signal their united front. “It’s a high-stakes group, Mac,” Sturgis said, casting a pointed glance at both Rick and Joss. “Always has been.”

Rick checked his luxury watch, clearly bored by the military talk. “As much as I’d love a trip down memory lane, a few guys from the lacrosse team are waiting for me. He took one last, dismissive look at Harm’s rumpled clothes and shook his head. “Rabb... get an iron on that shirt before dinner. The Academy still has its standards.”

With a condescending nod, Rick turned and sauntered off into the crowd.

Jocelyn tapped her clipboard, her voice smooth and in total control. “I have to check on the Commandant’s arrival for the toast. Harm... we will definitely catch up later. One-on-one.”

With a lingering look at Harm, Jocelyn spun on her heel and glided back into the sea of attendees.

Harm watched her go, shaking his head in slight admiration. “The political life suits her.”

Mac didn't look at Harm. Her eyes remained locked on the space where Jocelyn Vance had just been standing, her mind cataloging the aggressive confidence radiating off the blonde commander and the immediate target Joss had just painted on her back.

“Yeah,” Mac murmured, her voice dropping into a dry, quiet register as she took a sip from her glass. “She certainly knows what she wants, Harm. And I don’t think she’s used to being told no.”

Harm chuckled softly, completely unaware of the line that had just been drawn beside him. Mac’s fingers brushed against his wrist, grounding him to her side as her mind made a decisive calculation.

She's about to learn how a Marine Colonel handles a contest for ground.

The warm, rhythmic drone of cicadas hummed through the humid Maryland night as the moon hung low over the Severn River. Across the cobblestone walkways of the United States Naval Academy, the stately brick facade of the newly renovated Bancroft Hall VIP Alumni Suites stood quiet, overlooking the darkened Yard. Through the third-story window, a soft amber glow cut through the darkness, casting long shadows across a sprawling, king-sized bed.

Inside, the carefully constructed boundaries of a seven-year professional partnership were officially under siege.

Mac was lying flat on her stomach, sprawled dead center across the middle of the mattress. Her legs were bent at the knees, her ankles crossing back and forth in the air. She wore a sleek, satin nightgown that draped loosely over her curves, providing an incredibly generous, uninterrupted view of her long, tanned legs. Her legal briefcase sat open on the nightstand, and she was currently scribbling furiously in a leather-bound notebook, transcribing notes from the journal Mrs. Mercer had given her, the one belonging to Chaz.

Harm was sitting a few feet away in a heavy armchair, his long legs stretched out with his bare feet propped up on the edge of the mattress. He was dressed simply in white boxers and a t-shirt, leaned back at an angle that looked relaxed but felt entirely taut.

In a desperate, highly disciplined effort to keep his eyes off the mesmerizing view in the center of the bed, Harm was focusing all his energy on his right hand, rhythmically tossing a solid brass Academy challenge coin, the commemorative souvenir given to all reunion participants, up into the air.

Flip. Catch. Flip. Catch.

For years, they had spent countless late nights in cramped, poorly lit offices or dingy overseas hotel rooms, pouring over JAG case files. But back then, the uniform, the regulations, and the fear of ruining their partnership had kept a safe, invisible line between them. Tonight, those lines were entirely gone. Harm knew exactly what Mac looked like beneath that satin gown, and the sheer proximity was making it nearly impossible to concentrate.

“Okay,” Mac murmured, chewing lightly on the end of her pen as she tapped a page of her notebook, her legal mind shifting into high gear. “Let’s look at the timeline from Chaz’s letters again. Senior year at the Academy isn’t just about finishing classes; service selection is a bloodbath. You’re competing nationally for a finite number of billets—Navy Air, Surface Warfare, Submarines, Marines. And if you’re in Systems or Ocean Engineering, your class rank down to the decimal point dictates whether you get Nuclear Power School or a secondary assignment.”

She paused, highlighting a passage. “Chaz specifically mentions an instructor, a professor, who was systematically breaking him down. He kept referring to him as ‘The Gatekeeper.’ Listen to this line from October of ‘83: *‘No matter what I submit, it’s never enough. He told me some people are born to command, and others are born to be the friction that tests them. He’s adjusting the grading curve. He’s actively deciding who gets the prime engineering sub billets and tech slots. I have to do everything I can to make sure it’s me.’*”

Harm caught the brass coin in his palm, his knuckles tightening. “The engineering pipeline senior year was ruthless. If a professor was manipulating the engineering grades, he could literally rewrite a midshipman’s service selection board profile before graduation. Securing a pilot slot through service selection was just as rigorous; aptitude testing, medical screenings, perfect vision, and relentless peer

evaluations.”

Harm exhaled a soft laugh, reminiscing. “Keeter and I vowed to have each other’s backs no matter who got in.”

Mac leaned her head back, shooting him a teasing, razor-sharp arch of her brow. “Keeter? You’re telling me he passed the aviation aptitude battery without cheating? The man doesn’t exactly project high-level spatial reasoning.”

“Hey,” Harm said, stepping up in mild defense, though a wry grin tugged at his mouth. “Jack acts like a loose cannon, but he’s sharp as a razor when it counts. Flight school was hell, but we dragged each other across the finish line.”

Mac raised her pen, tapping it against her palm with an amused smirk. “Look at you. After what happened on the lawn, I’m surprised you’re speaking so highly of your wingman.”

Harm narrowed his eyes, catching her gaze with a slow, deliberate look. “I’ll defend his flight record all day, as long as he keeps his hands to himself.”

Mac’s lips twitched with a quiet satisfaction before she steered them back to the case, rolling onto her side and bracing her chin in her hand. “Let’s bring this back to the suspect pool. We need to narrow this down based on what we clocked today.”

“Alright, let’s rule out the obvious,” Harm said, leaning forward, his prosecutor instincts fully engaged. “Sturgis is out. He’s a straight shooter, always has been. He doesn’t have a corrupt bone in his body. Sturgis pursues justice, not personal leverage.”

“Agreed. And Keeter is too transparent,” Mac added, tapping her pen against the paper. “He’s a rogue, his ego is loud, but he’s not a murderer. He can’t hide a secret well enough to pull off a twenty-year cover-up. That rules those two out completely.”

Mac turned the page, her expression sharpening. “Which leaves a core five. And what makes this terrifyingly solid from an evidentiary standpoint is that every single one of them was in the Engineering Department, and Chaz logged a specific journal entry on each of them.”

Harm leaned in, his interest piqued. “Break them down.”

“First, Marshall,” Mac read from Chaz’s notes, her eyes tracking the cramped ink. “Chaz wrote that Marshall was failing Advanced Thermodynamics and terrified of washing out of naval reactors. Chaz caught him in the lab after hours altering test data, but when Chaz confronted him, Marshall flat out denied it. Claimed he was just re-running the numbers.”

She turned the page, her expression darkening. “Then there’s Rick Sterling. Chaz noted that Rick was consumed by the top engineering spot, driven by an almost pathological need to outshine his father’s legacy. Chaz explicitly wrote: *‘Rick told me if I stand in his way, he’ll eliminate the obstacle.’*”

“Classic Sterling,” Harm muttered, his jaw setting.

“Third, Joss Vance,” Mac continued, her voice dropping into a dry, quiet register. “Before she pivoted into Legislative Affairs, Joss was an Ocean Engineering major, obsessed with being the first woman to top the department. After she lost her bid for Class President Firstie year, she swore she’d never take a backseat again.”

Mac paused, glancing at Harm. “Chaz wrote that what started as a solid friendship turned toxic. He described her as completely possessed, saying he had to watch his back at every turn. She was leveraging her family connections to force the department head into re-evaluating class standings.”

Harm kept his gaze fixed, his expression calm and analytical. “I know how Chaz saw it, Mac, but as an investigator, you have to look at the profile. Joss was a female midshipman in a hyper-competitive engineering track twenty years ago. She was fierce, ruthless, and politically sharp, she had to be to survive. But ambition doesn't automatically make someone a killer.”

Mac shot him a quiet, razor-sharp look that signaled her radar was still locked firmly on Joss, but she kept reading.

“Fourth, Bobby. Chaz noted Bobby was already on thin ice after getting hit with a formal conduct offense for running underground poker games in the hall.

He couldn't afford another demerit, let alone a scandal that would strip his security clearance before commissioning.”

Mac turned the page, her eyes narrowing at the next entry. “And fifth, Rita. Chaz suspected Rita was deliberately leaking stolen gouge, exam keys, and then turning in the midshipmen who took the bait, cementing her own standing with the Honor Board. Every single one of them had a career-ending motive to keep Chaz from blowing the whistle.”

“Motive, opportunity, and a direct paper trail in Chaz’s own handwriting,” Harm concluded softly, tossing the challenge coin one last time and setting it down. “Five engineering classmates, one professor as the catalyst. Over the next few days during the reunion events, we start subtly dropping references to Chaz’s final days. We monitor the top five, watch how the rest of the class reacts, and see who cracks first. Meanwhile, we track down who 'The Gatekeeper' was.”

Mac didn't close the notebook right away. Instead, her thumb traced a small, yellowed piece of stationery tucked into the back sleeve, an unsent letter written in faded blue ink as all the pages were filled.

“There’s one more entry,” Mac said, her voice dropping into a quiet, somber register. “It’s a note he wrote to Joanie... just two days before he died. He never got to mail it.”

Harm leaned in, the sharp edge of his legal mind softening as the emotional weight of the tragedy settled over the room. “Read it.”

Mac took a quiet breath, letting Chaz’s own words fill the quiet suite:

“Dearest Joanie,

The air down by the Creek is cold tonight, but my head is finally clear. They keep telling us that to wear these eagles someday, we have to surrender pieces of who we are. They call it the cost of ambition. And I am about to pay a pretty toll.

I look at some of my classmates, the lengths they’re willing to go, the lines they’re crossing just to secure a prime service selection, and I know I can’t live like that.

I'm going to the Commandant on Monday, and I'm bringing the evidence with me. I know it's going to ignite a firestorm on the Yard, and I know I might lose my own commission because of it. But if I stay silent, I've already failed the only test that actually matters.

If no one here wants to listen right now, it doesn't matter. My voice will be heard one way or another.

I'm sealing this piece of truth with you tonight, Joanie, because you're the only place that held truth for me when everything else turned dark.

Wish me luck. I just want to come home with my honor intact.

Yours always,

Chaz"

Silence stretched across the room, heavy and reverent. Chaz had believed his truth was bound to those paper pages, never imagining his voice would reach across twenty years to pull them right back to where it all began.

"He wasn't going to break," Harm said softly, his jaw tightening with a deep, solemn respect for the midshipman he'd lost. "He was going to do the right thing."

"And someone killed him for it," Mac whispered.

With delicate care, she tucked the letter back into the sleeve, finally closing the leather journal and sliding it into her briefcase.

Harm eagerly tossed the brass trinket onto the nightstand, entirely done with games. He hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her all night. Despite reuniting with brothers-in-arms he hadn't seen in years, his mind had constantly tied back to the woman in the green dress earlier, and now the woman in satin in front of him.

The pure, intoxicating fact was that she was his. They were finally out in the open, and seeing her standing proudly amongst his most sacred memories, the historic buildings where he had learned the meaning of duty, honor, and country, filled him with a profound sense of

peace.

Years ago, it had been Diane Schonke standing beside him within these gates, two years his junior. But that was a past, fractured version of him. Diane had been a tragedy, an on-again, off-again ghost that could never truly compete with his obsession with flying or the mystery around his missing father.

But Mac? Mac had come into his life like the United States Marine she was. She had stormed the beaches of his guarded heart, landed on solid ground, established a permanent perimeter, and absolutely refused to vacate the premises. She was bigger, fiercer, and more vital than anything that had ever been a part of his life.

As Mac finished locking her briefcase and reached out to turn off the bedside lamp, Harm caught her deftly around the waist, halting her mid-motion and pulling her effortlessly backward into his lap.

Mac let out a soft gasp as she landed against his broad chest, her hands automatically finding his shoulders. Harm looked down at her, his expression intense, his thumb gently tracing her jawline.

“The mention of Diane... and everyone reacting to your resemblance to her today. It bothered you,” Harm stated firmly. It wasn't a question; it was a direct, protective acknowledgment. He knew her too well to let her harbor any unspoken doubts, and he wanted them silenced right now.

Mac looked into his eyes, the absolute honesty in his gaze making it impossible to hide behind her usual armor. She let out a quiet breath. “At first, it did. It’s been so long since her name has been a factor between us that I’d put it behind me. But being here... watching your classmates freeze up and stare at me? It brought it right back. That was the same look you used to give me.”

“Hey,” Harm murmured, his voice dropping into that deep, fiercely loyal register that always grounded her. “Remember this: no matter what happened in the past, you are the woman I am with. You are the one holding my hand, sleeping in my bed, and standing by my side this week. That is all that matters to me. And before this week is over, every single one of them will see you exactly the way I do.”

He cupped her face in his large hands, drawing her close, and pressed his lips to hers in an intense, lingering kiss that tasted of absolute certainty.

When he finally pulled back, his lips traced a slow, deliberate path down her jawline, mapping out a heated trail along the sensitive skin of her neck. Mac's breath hitched, her fingers tangling in his dark hair, her analytical mind completely evaporating under the onslaught of his touch.

"Now, Colonel MacKenzie," Harm whispered against her skin, his hands making themselves known as they slid down her waist, reacquainting themselves with every curve of her body. "There is one highly critical order of business we need to attend to before we call it a night."

"And what is that?" she breathed, her heart hammering against her ribs.

A roguish, competitive smirk played on Harm's lips as he pulled back just enough to look her in the eye. "Our very own welcome party. No crowds. No formal receiving lines. Just you and me."

Catching on to the game, Mac arched an eyebrow, a saucy, challenging spark returning to her eyes. "And what are the rules of this party, Commander?"

Harm didn't hesitate. He leaned in, his breath warm against her ear, and whispered a promise that made her blood run hot.

Mac smiled dynamically, her fingers tightening on his shirt as she looked back up at him. "You're on, Rabb."

Harm's eyes darkened with intense, playful mischief as he slid a hand to her waist. "Glad to hear it, Colonel... but first, Academy rules dictate I have to empty your pockets."

Before Mac could even laugh at the tables being turned, and him not forgetting for a second how thoroughly she had enjoyed watching his classmates hound him earlier, Harm stood up from the armchair, smoothly hoisting her completely off her feet. With a delighted grin, he flipped her upside down, catching her securely around her thighs and lower back, holding her tight against his massive frame.

The sudden loss of gravity made Mac squeal, a burst of rich, genuine laughter echoing through the room as her satin nightgown gave way to the laws of physics. The material pooled around her waist, giving Harm a completely unrestricted view of her gorgeous, toned legs, while his large hands firmly cupped her behind to keep her secure. Her chest fought a losing battle to stay contained within the silk neckline as she dangled upside down.

“Harm! Let me up!” she ordered, trying to sound authoritative but failing miserably through her laughter and a breathless groan.

“Not a chance,” Harm grinned, thoroughly enjoying his victory. “Not without the code to come right side up.”

Mac glared at his chest playfully, her eyes flashing with a mix of stubbornness and pure seduction. She knew he would not break until she fed him what he wanted to hear. Leaning into his torso, she recited the ultimate, ironclad phrase he pressed upon her whenever he had to come to her rescue.

“The Marine Corps requests immediate emergency extraction from the Navy,” she whispered into his skin.

Harm chuckled deeply, the unique, intimate code hitting its mark perfectly. “Atta girl.”

With a smooth, powerful shift of his weight, he flipped her right side up. Mac immediately wrapped her long legs tightly around his waist, her arms locking behind his neck as he carried her the remaining two steps to the bed. Harm didn't waste a single second, resuming his assault along her neck, his mouth dipping into her cleavage as Mac let out a low, breathless groan.

“Let's get this welcome party underway,” Harm murmured. He laid her gently down onto the crisp white sheets, his heavy, muscular body immediately covering hers, anchoring her to the mattress. His hands found the hem of her satin nightgown, slowly working the material up and off her body.

“Show me everything,” Mac whispered, her eyes dark with a fierce, burning passion, entirely turned on by his dominance. “Don't leave a single thing out.”

THE YARD

“With you, Sarah,” Harm breathed, his lips pressing hard against hers as the nightgown discarded onto the floor, “I never do.”

Outside, the quiet night of the Naval Academy continued its steady, historic rhythm. But inside the cocoon of their private suite, the soft, urgent sounds of their shared passion filled the space, a chaotic, beautiful symphony of whispers, sighs, and deep, unyielding declarations. The boy who had once walked these halls torn between duty and the ghosts of the past had finally returned as a man, completely whole, adding a new, unforgettable memory to the heart of the Yard.

CHAPTER COMPANION



REUNION PACKET



THE SOUND OF THE CHAPTER



CHAPTER THREE
PLAYLIST

SOME BONDS
ARE BUILT IN YOUTH.
SOME ONLY GROW
STRONGER WITH TIME.

Brother
by Kodaline

For the bond forged in youth, when everything was faced shoulder to shoulder, and for the years that carried them onto different roads without ever undoing the promise that they would still stand for one another when it mattered most.

Glory Days
by Bruce Springsteen

For the bright ache of looking back, where the years at the Academy return in flashes of laughter, bravado, and unfinished sunlight, and the men they once were still seem close enough to touch.

The Bones
by Maren Morris

For Harm and Mac, whose romance does not rise on impulse but on a foundation laid over years of friendship, trust, and partnership, steady enough to hold what is only now beginning to grow between them.

THE YARD

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THE YARD- CHAPTER THREE

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RETURN TO CHAPTERS

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